

Jackson zoners, planners quit after appearing at anti-development meeting

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JACKSON - What were they doing there in the first place?

That's the question reverberating through Jackson following the resignation of three land use board members last week. The departures followed the disclosure that they had attended a private meeting with a decidedly anti-development bent.

The ouster of the three officials was necessary because their impartiality could be called into question — and possibly lead to lawsuits, a township official said Tuesday.

Zoning board chairman Sheldon Hofstein and member Joseph Sullivan, along with planning board member Richard Egan, submitted their resignation letters after audio surfaced of the trio attending a local meeting of Citizens United to Protect our Neighborhoods, a New York-based grassroots group that aims to curb development.



ASBURY PARK PRESS PHOTO BY THOMAS P. COSTELLO - - - 4/6/00 - - - A welcome to Jackson sign along Rt 571 (Photo: Digital Collections/IPTC)

In a brief phone interview, Egan said he was not asked to resign.

said, before hanging up. Hofstein and Sullivan did not return requests for comment.

Zoning board attorney Sean Gertner said that attending a meeting where "anti-development strategies are being discussed potentially taints the outcome of both any individual application and potentially adds fuel to the fire of future litigation."

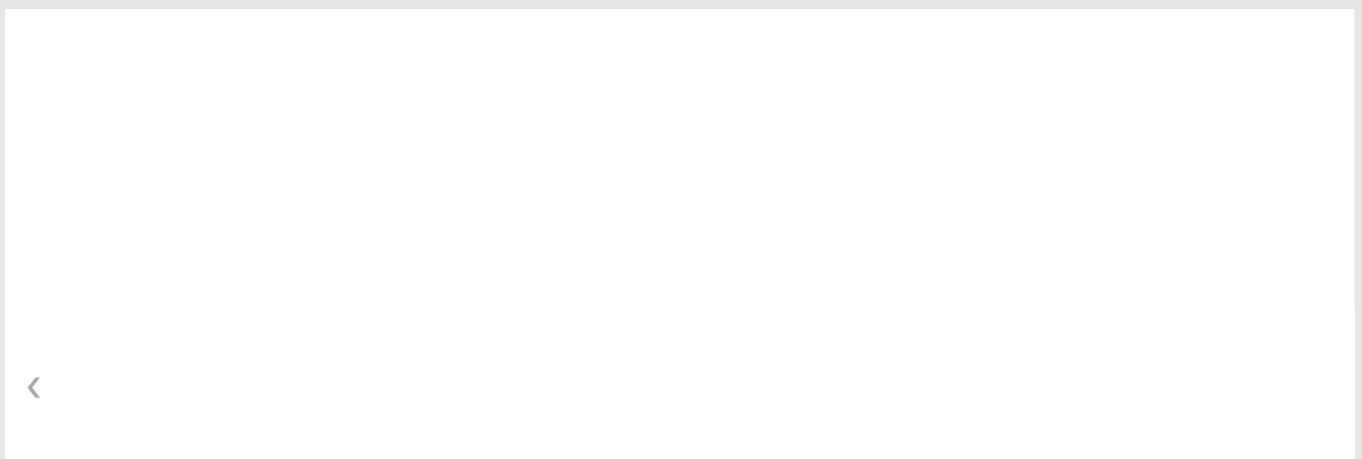
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The township is already being sued by the Orthodox Jewish advocacy group Agudath Israel ([/story/news/local/communitychange/2019/05/20/jackson-outrageously-targeted-orthodox-jews-lawsuit-claims/1150572001/](https://story/news/local/communitychange/2019/05/20/jackson-outrageously-targeted-orthodox-jews-lawsuit-claims/1150572001/)) in part due to the zoning board's denial of an Orthodox Jewish girls' high school, ([/story/news/local/jackson-lakewood/lakewood/2014/06/18/jackson-nixes-orthodox-school/10825257/](https://story/news/local/jackson-lakewood/lakewood/2014/06/18/jackson-nixes-orthodox-school/10825257/)), which Hofstein himself voted against.

"The continued membership of (Hofstein and Sullivan) became untenable because their judgement could be questioned for even attending this meeting," Gertner said. "That's not to say that individual members — or the board as a whole — lose their First Amendment rights to educate themselves about how zoning has an effect upon the community over which their decisions have an impact."

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"But it's the balance that's important. Board members have to always recognize that impartiality on every individual and specific application is paramount," Gertner said.

Planning boards approve or deny development projects that conform with the town's master plan and can impose requirements — such as speed bumps or specific types of roofing — as a condition of approval. Learn more about a housing project being heard before the planning board ([/story/news/local/redevelopment/2019/08/02/jackson-parke-new-jersey-homes-affordable-housing/1856611001/](https://story/news/local/redevelopment/2019/08/02/jackson-parke-new-jersey-homes-affordable-housing/1856611001/)), in a video at the top of the page.



Jackson Township Municipal Building. Wednesday, March 19, 2014, Berkeley. Robert Ward /Staff Photographer. webart (Photo: Robert Ward/Asbury Park Press)

Zoning boards are tasked with approving or denying applications for land use development that don't conform with the township's master plan — such as a housing development proposed on a property currently zoned for a commercial business or farm.

Last week, the hyperlocal blog the Lakewood Scoop [published audio and images of the trio \(https://www.thelakewoodscoop.com/news/2019/08/is-there-a-conspiracy-to-keep-orthodox-jews-out-of-jackson-audio.html\)](https://www.thelakewoodscoop.com/news/2019/08/is-there-a-conspiracy-to-keep-orthodox-jews-out-of-jackson-audio.html), attending the CUPON meeting. In one audio clip, Hofstein can be heard saying, "we're not supposed to be here."

"We didn't sign in. We're neutral — like, we're invisible," Egan is heard saying.

In a second audio clip, an unidentified Lakewood teacher is heard saying she "can't sit down and not do something." Hofstein suggests that the teacher submit an application to serve on a board.

"There are openings right now on the zoning board, on the Environmental Commission. And what happens is, we have to wait two or three months because people don't put themselves out there to apply," Hofstein said. "If you're interested, send it into the town. The last opening we had on the zoning board took four months to fill because nobody would put themselves out there."

In recent years, Jackson several zoning officials have been under the spotlight, too often for the wrong reasons.

In 2017, the township passed an ordinance requiring potential board members to fill out an in-depth form and provide references and links to social media accounts [after a series of high-profile incidents \(/story/news/local/communitychange/2017/11/30/jackson-zoning-board-background-check-social-media-child-porn-arrest/903274001/\)](https://www.thelakewoodscoop.com/news/2017/11/30/jackson-zoning-board-background-check-social-media-child-porn-arrest/903274001/) involving current and former zoning board members.

Anthony Marano, sitting on the zoning board at the time, was arrested in September 2017 on [possession of child pornography \(/story/news/crime/jersey-mayhem/2017/10/10/jackson-township-anthony-marano-council-vote/749806001/\)](https://www.thelakewoodscoop.com/news/2017/10/10/jackson-township-anthony-marano-council-vote/749806001/) and brandished a loaded handgun at the arresting officers. It was unclear how the case was resolved.

Around the same time, former board member John Burrows made a Facebook post calling on Ocean County politicians to commit suicide because of their relationships with the Orthodox Jewish community of Lakewood.

Referring to Lakewood's 3.5 percent sales tax, part of the state's Urban Enterprise Zone program, Burrows wrote: "Pay your fair share, you filthy (expletive) cockroaches."

Soon after, newly appointed zoning board member Larry Schuster resigned after eight days citing unforeseen family commitments — days after Facebook posts came to light in which Schuster [posted crude memes about Orthodox Jews. \(/story/news/local/communitychange/2017/10/19/jackson-zoning-board-member-resignation-was-resigns-family-commitment-criticized-online-anti-semitis/779587001/\)](https://www.thelakewoodscoop.com/news/2017/10/19/jackson-zoning-board-member-resignation-was-resigns-family-commitment-criticized-online-anti-semitis/779587001/)

"You have to make sure people are ethical, well-respected and good enough to be appointed to the position," Councilman Barry Calogero said at the time.

Over the last five years, northern Ocean County — especially Jackson — has seen increased tensions between a growing Orthodox Jewish population and township officials and longtime residents.

There have been public clashes over restrictions on school and dormitories serving the growing Orthodox Jewish population, as well as on eruvim, wires hung on utility poles that symbolically allow Orthodox Jews to carry objects as they travel on the Sabbath.
([/story/news/local/communitychange/2017/03/16/jackson-lakewood-orthodox-dormitories/99253236/](https://www.app.com/story/news/local/communitychange/2017/03/16/jackson-lakewood-orthodox-dormitories/99253236/))

CUPON was founded in Rockland County, New York, ([/story/news/local/rockland/2019/02/14/cupon-rockland-expands-countywide/2788680002/](https://www.app.com/story/news/local/rockland/2019/02/14/cupon-rockland-expands-countywide/2788680002/)) an area that has seen similar clashes over development.

Mike Davis has spent the last decade covering New Jersey local news, marijuana legalization, transportation and basically whatever else is happening. Contact him at 732-643-4223, mdavis@gannettnj.com (<mailto:mdavis@gannettnj.com>), or @byMikeDavis (<https://www.twitter.com/bymikedavis>) on Twitter.

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